

Chapter 13

(Friday Night, August 10)

Terri watched the exchange of gunfire with horror. When it was over, she ran toward Randy and flung herself into his arms. He held her in a tight embrace, but she lifted her head and kissed him, not so much out of passion but out of desperation. She was overwhelmed with emotion, mostly relief that they were both still alive.

An hour later, they were sitting in Lt. Jurgens' office at the NIU campus police station.

"The one you shot and the one we shot are both dead. The one you knocked unconscious with the fire extinguisher is going to make it. He's at the University Medical Center under heavy guard. I've contacted the FBI in Chicago. Several agents should be here shortly. They're going to take charge of him." He paused and smiled. "I must say, you handled yourself pretty well against three professionals."

Randy seemed a little shy. Odd, he never felt that way when receiving accolades about his abilities and accomplishments in physics. "I've studied Karate a little, and I've done quite a bit of target shooting for recreation. I also had a few lucky breaks."

"Well, it came in handy tonight. And you say all this was over some research that Dr. Baker conducted?"

"Yes," Terri answered. "From what they said in the car, that's definitely what they were after."

"If the problem of cold fusion is ever solved," Randy offered, "it would revolutionize the production of electricity. There are probably a lot of countries that would stop at nothing to get that research. I think Saudi Arabia was just in the right place at the right time."

Jurgens brought the session to an end, "I think we've gotten enough information for now." His smile was kind. "And I also think this brave young lady here would very much appreciate it if you'd take her home."

Terri was holding Randy's hand while they were sitting in Jurgens' office. Since they left Faraday Hall, she just felt like she never wanted to let go of him. The physical contact was such a comfort to her. Smiling gratefully back at Jurgens, she said, "Thank you, Lieutenant. Yes, I really would like to go home."

However, it did not seem like the trip home would begin immediately. As they opened the outside doors to leave the building, Lorraine Anderson came running toward them.

Randy and Terri were holding hands, but that did not stop Lorraine. She came running up and threw her arms around both of them.

"Oh, Dr. Carrington, Terri, I'm so glad you're both okay. I got the police as fast as I could."

Randy gently took her arms and extracted himself and Terri from her bear hug. Terri watched the two of them with much amusement. "We both owe you a lot, Lorraine. Without you, we might have been killed." Her eyes brightened, and she felt overwhelmed by the thought that she might have saved their lives. "I'm only sorry," Randy continued, "that for a few minutes there, you were in serious danger yourself."

Her eyes widened as an amazing thought struck her. "Dr. Carrington, you were so brave there when you warned me. You probably saved my life!"

Terri entered into the conversation. "Well, I think we were all very brave and did the right thing." She took a step toward Lorraine, and the two of them hugged briefly.

"Goodnight, Lorraine," Randy said.

"Goodnight, Dr. Carrington, Terri. I think you two make a great couple!"

Terri smiled, but Randy looked just a little embarrassed.

As they were walking back to Randy's car near Faraday Hall, Terri took his hand and said, "Yeah, a think we make a great couple too!"

Things seemed to be moving very quickly again, and that always made Randy nervous--not enough time for analysis. But he squeezed her hand, and began, "Well, I..."

Terri laughed. "No need for a response right now, my cautious physicist! Just take me home and kiss me goodnight."

He put his arm around her and hugged her. "I think I can manage that," he said smiling.

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"You mean the desk wasn't even in your office anymore? Where was it?" Terri asked, while they were driving back to her house.

"Well, early this morning while the building was still pretty empty, Wes and I moved it into his office. That way if they did come to my office looking for it, I could spring my little trap and at least the desk would be safe." He paused. Then in a somewhat deflated tone, he continued, "I thought I was so smart, but as it turned out, the idea really backfired. If the desk had still been in my office tonight, they wouldn't have come looking for us

in the boiler room."

"Not only that," Terri said, "but you put yourself in real danger. Even if they hadn't come for me at the boutique, they might have showed up at your door with three guns pointed at you. They would not have been happy that the desk wasn't there."

"Well, that was actually the scenario I was picturing. I guess I was willing to risk a little danger on my part to protect the research, but I would not have been willing to risk any danger to you."

"So what was this trap?"

"Not much, really. I had alerted the campus police so that they would keep an eye on Faraday Hall and then respond immediately to my call without asking a bunch of questions first. Then if the bad guys showed up at my office, while I was supposedly leading them to the desk elsewhere in the building, there would be enough time for the police to get there and capture them."

Terri just shook her head in dismay. Then another thought struck her. "Hey, you know what's really ironic after all this?" Terri asked. "We still don't even know where the research is!"

"Nor do we know if Baker made any major breakthroughs," he added, as they turned into Terri's driveway. He shut off the engine. "Well, I guess you won't need me anymore. You can sleep in perfect safety tonight."

She looked at him with a wry grin on her face. "I may be able to sleep in perfect safety tonight, but I'd never say I don't need you." Then she felt a little flustered. "I'm not asking you to stay tonight..I just mean..."

He reached over and touched her face lightly with his fingertips. "I know what you mean. We do seem to be growing...closer. This experience, with the danger and all, seems to have brought us closer together at an accelerated rate."

"'An accelerated rate'?" She laughed. "I'm amazed at how you think in technical terminology no matter what the context. Leave it to a physicist to try to quantify romance!"

"You're right," he said a little sheepishly. "I guess that wasn't the most romantic way to put things, but the phrase seemed to fit. These last couple of days have made me...I mean, have seemed to create something special between us." At this, however, he apparently thought he had said too much. In a somewhat different tone, he added, "But of course we have plenty of time."

With that, he got out and walked around the car to open the door for her.

As they walked up to the door of the house, Terri realized that he was not yet ready to admit what she firmly believed he felt. They were in love. She knew that she had fallen in love with him even before these last two days, and in a hundred different ways, he had shown that he was in love with her. Soon, she thought, maybe very soon, he would tell her.

"Come on in," she said. "We'll gather up the few things you brought over last night, and then you can give me that goodnight kiss you promised."

Terri unlocked the door. As they walked in, she flipped on the living light.

There facing them on the sofa was Tahir Aziz with a gun aimed directly at them.

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Terri gasped, and Randy's face went very hard.

"Close the door and sit down." They did as they were told. "I was watching Faraday Hall from a distance. It was obvious that my three associates were unsuccessful."

Terri regained her composure. This was not some unknown man on a dark street but Tahir, a man she had dated.

"Tahir, why are you doing this? I thought we liked each other. You were so kind and polite. I just can hardly believe it."

"I am whatever I am required to be to accomplish my mission, whether it be polite or ruthless. I am afraid I must now assume the latter posture. You will take me to Dr. Baker's desk, or one of you will die."

"But Tahir," she implored desperately, "there was nothing in that desk when I bought it. I don't have Dr. Baker's research and neither does Randy."

"That is where you are wrong. There is a most remarkable feature to this desk. The hutch has a built-in secret compartment. When closed, it is hidden by a decorative panel. Baker often placed papers he was working on in this secret storage area. Not that he was trying to hide them. He simply had a child-like fascination with its secrecy. Mrs. Baker knew about it, of course, but I suspect that in her grief she overlooked the compartment when gathering up all his materials. Since none of his most recent papers were found, they must be in the desk."

Randy spoke for the first time. "How did you get in here? The door wasn't forced."

"Physics was not the only subject in which I was trained in Saudi Arabia."

"You're an agent of Saudi Arabia, aren't you? You work for the government, and you want this research for Saudi Arabia."

"I must say I was most impressed with you, Dr. Carrington. You figured out what was really going on, beginning with the break-in at Miss Lockhart's boutique. You anticipated our moves and thwarted them. That is, you together with some bad luck. But in this one respect you did not understand our real motivation. We do not want that research to set up fusion reactors in Saudi Arabia. We want to destroy it. If the secret to cold fusion is discovered and disseminated throughout the world, as Baker surely would have done, it would destroy our economy, which is based on the sale of oil."

"But no one knows if Baker succeeded."

"That is true, but it does not matter. He might have succeeded. Then again, even if he did not make a major discovery, we do not know how close he came. We cannot let others build on his work. I must obtain his papers and destroy them."

"What would you have done if Baker had lived?" Randy asked.

"We had several contingencies worked out, depending on the exact circumstances. But there is no need to reveal our strategies to you."

"Why did you ask me out Tahir?" Terri almost seemed hurt.

"Agents need to blend in, lead a very normal life. I had a job as a post doc, but it would look even better if I had--how do you say it?--a girlfriend."

"If you get the papers, will you let us live?" she asked.

"I admit that you have put me in a difficult situation. You two are the only ones who know for a fact that the research exists. Saudi Arabia is a country that has had a long-standing friendship with the United States. My government would not want it known that it sent agents into the U.S. to destroy important research that would greatly benefit your country."

"And you believe your government would sanction two murders?" Terri asked.

"That I do not know, but there is no time to contact my government. I am afraid that I must make what the military would call a command decision."

"You're wrong about the two of us being the only ones who know about the research," Randy said. "I made a full report both to the campus police and to the FBI. In fact, the only one of your compatriots who is still alive is even now in FBI custody. If we turn up dead, that would confirm everything I told them."

"That I did not know. Nevertheless, I am the only one of the four of us who can actually be traced to Saudi Arabia. As long as I am not caught in any compromising situation, Saudi Arabia is in a position to maintain plausible deniability."

"But I told them about you."

"They have only your suspicions about me. The same is true of your colleague, Dr. Tanner. There is no evidence to link me to any of these events. I am afraid I must keep it that way."

Randy realized that they had reached the end of the argument, and the conclusion was obvious. Their lives were in grave danger.

"Now we have talked long enough. Please take me to the desk."

"You know where it is. It's in my office in Faraday Hall." Terri's eyes expressed surprise as she looked at Randy questioningly. Fortunately, Aziz was not watching her.

"Then I suggest we all go there. I do not wish to be caught breaking and entering."

"And if we refuse to move?"

"Miss Lockhart will die right here, right now."

Randy looked over at Terri and nodded his head. The two of them stood up. Aziz kept his gun aimed in their direction.

"A prudent decision, Dr. Carrington. Come. You will drive and Miss Lockhart will sit with you in the front. I will sit in the back. Drive carefully. If you attempt to attract the attention of the police, Miss Lockhart will suffer the consequences."

It was quite late when they arrived back at Faraday Hall. Randy opened one of the rear outside doors for which faculty had keys. Slowly they walked to his office with Aziz eight or ten feet behind them.

Terri felt fear, but in a slightly different way. She was almost at the point of giving up all hope that she and Randy would survive. However, as they walked down the hallway, Randy put his arm around her and squeezed her shoulder. It seemed to be a gesture designed to reassure her, and somehow it did. Although she could see no possible way to escape, Randy's presence, with his arm around her, and his apparent confidence, rekindled a determination within her to survive. Somehow they would survive. If Randy believed it, she believed it. Then she suddenly remembered that the desk was no longer in his office. He was planning something. She must be alert to act instantly on his command.

Indeed, he did have a plan. It was all based on an observation he had made back at the house when Aziz was sitting there holding the gun on them.

As they approached the door of his office, he attempted to block a view of the destroyed doorknob from Aziz. He and Terri arrived at the door, Aziz still about six feet behind them. Randy got out his key and made a pretense of unlocking the door. He swung it inward, took Terri's hand, and led her into the office.

His own desk was visible from the hallway. The bookcases were on the wall to the right of the door, while the filing cabinet was on the wall to the left toward which the door opened. Randy stopped in front of the damaged doorknob about three feet into the office. Pretending to give Terri's shoulder an affectionate squeeze, he let her know that she was to move away from him along the wall.

She did not want to leave his side, but she had made up her mind to trust him and do exactly what he wanted. She casually continued walking deeper into the office along the left wall.

Aziz had never actually been in Randy's office and so would not be sure how big it was or how the furniture was situated. He walked up to the entrance. Randy's tensed muscles were poised for a quick movement. One or two steps more: that was all he would need.

As Aziz stood in the door frame, a puzzled look came over him. He took one more step in to get a better look at the entire office.

"Baker's desk is not..."

Before he could finish the sentence and while his mind was still distracted by the thought he was putting into words, Randy stepped quickly out of the path of the door and swung it with all his might.

As Randy had noticed at Terri's house, Aziz was holding the gun in his left hand, probably being left-handed. Before he realized what was happening, the heavy metal door smashed into his gun hand. The gun flew out of his hand, and Randy heard it hit the floor. That was the sound he wanted to hear above all else. He darted forward and pushed the door into Aziz, forcing him almost completely from the office.

"Terri, get the gun!" he shouted.

Aziz was somewhat off balance but not down. Randy swung the door open again and rammed his shoulder into Aziz. He stumbled back into the hallway completely off balance. However, it took but a second or two for him to regain it. His eyes darted into the office, looking for the gun. He saw it. He also saw Terri reaching out to pick it up. He had to get that gun back.

As Aziz bolted back toward the doorway, Randy pivoted and shot out his leg in a well-executed sidekick that landed just below the solar plexus. Aziz gasped for breath and stumbled backward once more. Randy turned to Terri and held out his hand. "The gun!" She had just gotten hold of it and instantly tossed it to him. He caught it and swung around to face Aziz, both arms outstretched in firing position.

It was over.